Byron and the Albanians: Unearthing Identities

Steiner - Karafili, Enit

ACADÉMIE DES SCIENCES D'ALBANIE
SECTION DES SCIENCES SOCIALES

STUDIA ALBANICA

2

XLVII[e] Année

2(

• Duro A. (1996), "*Krijimi i bankave terminologjike dhe hartimi i fjalorëve terminologjikë*", *në përmbledhjen* "SEMINARI I 17-të NDËRKOMBËTAR PËR GJUHËN, LETËRSINË DHE KULTURËN SHQIPTARE", TIRANË – ("*The Creation of Term Banks and the Compilation of Terminological Dictionaries*" (1996), (On Preceding "THE INTERNATIONAL 17th SEMINAR ON ALBANIAN LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURE", TIRANA.)

• Duro A. (2009), "*Termi dhe fjala në gjuhën shqipe*", Instituti i Gjuhësisë dhe i Letërsisë, Qendra e Studimeve Albanologjike, Tiranë – "*Term and Word in Albanian*", (2009), Institute of Linguistics and Literature, Center for Albanian Studies, Tirana.

Enit STEINER-KARAFILI

BYRON AND THE ALBANIANS: UNEARTHING IDENTITIES

In 1808, an Englishman of twenty years old sought the authorities of his country for permission to visit the British dominions in India, at the time called the East Indies.[1] His destination is the interior of Asia, to which he would take a direct course through the Ottoman dominions rather than opt for a longer route passing through the British colonies. But considering a journey on foreign ground impracticable, he asks for the above-mentioned permission. What is at first deemed impractical turns out to be his destiny: in June 1909, after missing in Falmouth the ship that should convey him to Malta on the way to Constantinople, he travels overland through Portugal, Spain continuing to Malta, Albania, Greece and Turkey. Although the young man never made it to the East Indies, the journey through Portugal and Spain, followed by that to Greece and Albania, made the stuff of world literature and gave posterity to George Gordon Byron and his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

Together with his friend John Cam Hobhouse, Byron penetrates the interior of the province of Albania on a visit to Ali Pasha, the despotic ruler of a region that included parts of modern Greece reaching as far south as the Gulf of Corinth and Albania as far north as Berat. When it comes to presenting Albania in his poetry and letters, Byron is aware of the privilege of a firstling, or an almost firstling. In more than one letter he boasts that his visit in Albania raises his journey above that of the common tourist. He writes to his friend Henry Drury in 1810:

> Greece ancient and modern you know too well to require description. Albania indeed I have seen more than any Englishman (but a Mr. Leake) for it is a country rarely visited from the savage character of the natives, though abounding in more natural beauties than the classical regions of Greece,

[1] George Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, vol. 1 (London: Murray, 1974-1994) 177.

which however are still eminently beautiful... Yet these are nothing to parts of Illyria.[2]

In canto II of *Childe Harold*, he revisits those places and mythological narratives which he expects his audience to know, being aware that evocations of the Greek heritage will not fall on deaf ears. As Nigel Leask points out, because the Napoleonic wars had made the well-trodden path of the European Grand Tour impossible, Britons were forced to abandon the Classical sites of Roman civilization and turn to the cradle of Western culture, Greece.[3] The interest for antiquities culminated in Lord Elgin's removal of the Parthenon marbles in 1801-1811, consequently the timing was perfect for a poem that dilated upon Greek heritage.

Most commentators do not fail to contrast Byron's dense intertwinement of Greek myths and places of significance with the swift change of imagery upon his entrance into Albania, the unknown territory. Nigel Leask writes: "Byron represents Albania as a scene of nature rather than culture, its picturesque beauties offering a relief from the heavily associated topography of Greece."[4] Leask's interpretation rests on the following stanza, where he takes the lack of historical evidence on Albania for the absence of culture:

> From the dark barriers of that rugged clime,
> Ev'n to the centre of Illyria's vales,
> Childe Harold pass'd o'er many a mountain sublime,
> Through lands scarce notic'd in historic tales;
> Yet in fam'd Attica such lovely dales
> Are rarely seen; nor can fair Tempe boast
> A charm they know not...[5]

Philip W. Martin, concurring with Leask, writes that Albania is "a very different place from the Europe which defined Harold's modernity within its history. For here, momentarily at least, the

[2] *Byron's Letters and Journals* 237-8.

[3] Nigel Leask, "Byron and the Eastern Mediterranean: *Childe Harold II* and the 'Polemic of Ottoman Greece,'" *Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. Drummond Bone (Cambridge: CUP, 2004) 104.

[4] Leask 111.

[5] Byron, "*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*," The Major Works (Oxford: OUP) 2. 406-414. Hereafter referred to as *CHP*. Future references will be given parenthetically within the body of the text.

weight of history is lifted."[6] However, before calling Albania a l scarcely "notic'd in historic tales," he introduces the transit through the ancient name, Illyria, an evidence in itself of deep-roo history. Thus, it is not fortuitous that the section on Albania st with the invocation of such a pivotal historical figure as Scander ("Land of Albania! Where Iskander rose") and it seems contradiction that a people primarily associated with nature, bar represented in history and unknown, should make its first appear by summoning its national hero (*CHP*, II. 38. 334). It is notewor that not Childe Harold, but the poet, i.e. the narrative voice opens section of Albania, as if the hero were always a step behind the p and waits to be taken by the hand and introduced to the new scen Notably, before the focus turns on Childe Harold's passage that Lea and Martin quote, the poet is already there not only mentally, but al visually:

> Land of Albania! Where Iskander rose,
> Theme of the young, and beacon of the wise,
> And he his name-sake, whose oft-baffled foes
> Shrunk from his deeds of chivalrous emprise:
> Land of Albania! Let me bend mine eyes
> On thee, thou rugged nurse of savage men!
> The cross descends, thy minarets arise,
> And the pale crescent sparkles in the glen,
> Through many a cypress grove within each city's ken. (*CH*
> 2. 334-341)

It follows that "mine eyes" do not refer to Harold, but to th poet, who visualizes historical and religious symbols: the descendi cross, the rising minaret and the pale sparkling crescent condense one line four hundred years of sorrowful history of Ottom occupation – a sad event that had followed Scanderbeg's death an led to a profound national and religious crisis, to which the po returns in stanza 44: "Here the red cross, for still the cross is her Though sadly scoffed at by the circumcis'd." The concrete historic meaning of the descending cross and rising minaret does more tha exemplify "the cyclical nature of time," as Tatiana Kuzmic woul

[6] Philip W. Martin, "Heroism and History: *Childe Harold* I and II and th Tales," *Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. Drummond Bone (Cambrdige: CU 2004) 87.

have it.[7] In a letter to his mother, Byron reminds her that Albania corresponds to "the ancient Illyricum."[8] This name comes up in the Epistle to the Romans, where St Paul proudly professes that he had proclaimed the Gospel among different people and nations, a spectrum extending from Jerusalem to Illyricum: "Through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God; so that from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ."[9] Hence, Illyria appears as a Christian country of the first hour and the cross that St Paul had preached in Greece and Illyria, in Byron's time, had almost succumbed to the new religion. The fact that this shift is preceded by the celebration of the Albanian national hero and military prowess alludes to the bloody events that accompanied Ottoman imperial expansion. By mentioning in mid-stanza, Iskander's "namesake," Byron is certainly stretching his reliance on his readers' education in history, when reminding them that Gibbon had established a connection between Alexander, Phyrrus's son, and Scanderbeg. In his notes to this stanza, Byron explains: "Iskander is the Turkish word for Alexander... I do not know whether I am correct in making Scanderbeg the country man of Alexander, who was born at Pella in Macedon, but Mr Gibbon terms him so" (*CHP* 87). The point to be made is that only after setting the historical stage, does the poet end the stanza with a reference to nature and to "many a cypress grove within each city's ken." He turns his attention to Childe Harold's encounter with the unknown, after paradoxically establishing himself as anything but a stranger to Albanian history. So in a sense, this section proposes itself as a potential historic tale among the few that have been written about Albania and disclosed to a wider readership. As such, it can be read as an educational project that uncovers the poet's own investment, as well as inducts the less-informed reader at home, including no one less than the hero of the poem, Childe Harold himself.

This seems a typical moment of the poet's distance and disassociation from Harold's perspective. The poet positions himself between his hero and his readership, seeking to negotiate a coherent meaning. As Martin suggests, "the poem's entry into Albania leaves its readers in no doubt about the liminal nature of this experience."[10] Martin expatiates on the symbolic transitions employed to depict the

[7] Tatiana Kuzmic, "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage in the Balkans," *Comparative Critical Studies* 4.1 (2007:56).
[8] *Byron's Letters and Journals* 226.
[9] *The Bible*, Epistle to the Romans 15.19.
[10] Martin 86.

new landscape as "bereft of familiar sights, customs or values," as Harold passes through "lands scarce noticed in historic tales."[11] But as we already saw, history presses itself forward a few stanzas before Harold enters Albania, so it is not the absence of history that makes this experience liminal, but rather the limitation of individual language which is clearly signaled as the hero treads on Albanian ground: "Harold felt himself at length alone/ And bade to Christian tongues a long adieu" (*CHP* 2. 379-80). Liminal here means barely expressible: how is the narrator to introduce "a savage scene," that in its novelty is both toilsome and "sweet" (*CHP* 2. 386)? Liminality is contained in the somewhat contradictory vocabulary: the territory Harold is entering is unknown, but how can it be unknown if "all admire it, but many dread to view" (*CHP* 2. 382). In this respect, unknown implies the untried, but not the unheard of and most importantly, no matter how new this territory is, it is already loaded with associations: admiration and fear both coexist in expectations that remind of the sublime. A moment in *Childe Harold* is particularly telling of the poet's conscious inability and limitations to describe what his hero experiences. As Childe Harold, at the end of the dinner party offered in his honor by Ali Pasha, assists with "gaping wonderment" the dance of the Albanian warriors, he can barely make himself understood:

> Childe Harold at a little distance stood
> And view'd, but not displease'd the revelrie,
> Nor hated harmless mirth, however rude:
> In sooth, it was no vulgar sight to see
> Their barbarous, yet their not indecent, glee,
> And, as the flames along their faces gleamed,
> Their gestures nimble, dark eyes flashing fire,
> The long wild locks that to their girdles stream'd,
> While thus in concert they this lay half sang, half screamed
> (*CHP* 2. 640-648)

The dance he describes "however rude ... it was no vulgar sight to see" and the dancers' mirth "barbarous, yet not indecent glee." The depiction suggests a category of its own, barbarous and uncouth, because it lacks the refinement of the rising British civilization, but all negative connotations associated with uncivilized cultures are excluded: no vulgarity and no indecency is to be found in the new, bizarre culture he is describing. The experience is conveyed

[11] Martin 86.

through a series of negations establishing difference. Remarkably, as Childe Harold browses his own culture to describe a different one, the narrative introduces a new level: the lyrics of the dancers. If up to that moment, the extra-diegetic narrator and his character have alternately mediated between experience and reader, now the focus lies on the Albanian dancers and their song. A song about war which names the brave Albanian tribes and their numerous enemies; it is a song that mixes domestic affections with national concerns; at first, it celebrates the Suliotes, the tribe that resisted Ali Pasha for years (and then triggered the Greek War of Independence), then praises Ali Pasha, the despot that persecuted them. Such an explosive choice of topic hardly restores the refreshing primeval innocence that Kuzmic juxtaposes to the disenchanted and experienced Childe Harold. In her otherwise perceptive article, Kuzmic contends that "Albania's youthfulness, however, comes as a refreshment and counterpoint to the very aged Greece ... As one who belongs to this aged cultural lineage, Harold comes to embody experience and disillusion while he witnesses displays of innocence and mirth."[12] This downplays the acute sense of a complicated history that foregrounds the section on Albania. I want to suggest that this section, because it involves linguistic and cultural translation, mars the historical relief that some critics point out. In this section, language and culture are most obviously intertwined as they converge in the performance of the warrior-dancer. The performance is both a dance and a song: the movements, non-verbal acts, are intrinsic to the meaning of the words. As Hobhouse writes in his opening remarks in *A Journey through Albania and other Provinces in Turkey, Europe and Asia*, the non-verbal is just as important as the verbal among the Albanians, if not more. Hobhouse is baffled by "a singular habit, prevalent with the Albanians, of expressing their meaning with short signs instead of words."[13] Childe Harold's, "gaping wonderment" as he assists the dance of the Albanian warriors implies the inability to fix meaning to the verbal and non-verbal.

Kuzmic does much of the line "Childe Harold at a little distance stood," reading the word distance as an expression of Harold's conscious dissociation from the heady spectacle: "fearing to be too closely associated with all this, the first line lets it be known that Harold watched, but did not participate."[14] But this "little

[12] Kuzmic 59.

[13] John Cam Hobhouse, *A Journey through Albania and other Provinces in Turkey, Europe and Asia* (Philadelphia: M. Carey, 1817) 1: 127.

[14] Kuzmic 59.

distance" can be interpreted as an unmediated experience, as being so closely to the scene as possible, but respecting it as something that one cannot and should not appropriate. It proves the poet's correct understanding of the performance, which is in fact a song that translates into intricate movements. In his notes, Byron describes its complexity with distinguished appreciation: the dance is "conjectured to be a remnant of ancient Pyrrhic: be that as it may, it is manly, and requires wonderful agility. It is very distinct from the stupid Romaika, the dull roundabout of the Greeks, of which our Athenian party had so many specimens" (*CHP* 89). Hobhouse describes the dance as "very violent" giving the following description: the leader of the string starts the song footing quietly from side to side:

> then he hops quickly forward dragging the whole string after him in a circle and then twirls round, dropping frequently on his knee, and rebounding from the ground with a shout; everyone repeating the burden of the song, and following the example of the leader, who after hopping, twirling, dropping on the knee, and bounding up again several times round and round, resigns his place to the man next to him. The new Coryphaeus leads them through the same evolutions, but endeavours to exceed his predecessor in the quickness and violence of his measures; and thus they continue at this sport for several hours, with very short intervals, seeming to derive fresh vigour from the words of the song, which is perhaps changed once or twice during the whole time.[15]

Hobhouse explains that the song is of a piece with the movements. So then, one not unimportant reason why Harold cannot participate is because he does not know the language that gives vigor to the song, the narrator makes it explicit that upon entering Albania, Harold "bade to Christian tongues a long adieu." What remains unsaid is that he is dependent on a translator, and a knowledgeable one, since the performance exceeds linguistic translation and the movements of the dance are part of that non-verbal code that had baffled Hobhouse.

Byron's depiction of Albanian folklore serves the double agenda of connecting the reader to this country's history and culture and compensating for the shortcomings of Harold's tongue and his individual perspective. The same trope has later been used to bolster a sense of national identity in encounters with foreigners, indeed it has

[15] Hobhouse 1: 135-36.

the other there stands the invisible translator-author that makes this experience for Harold and for the readers of the target language comprehensible. Byron seems aware of the certain linguistic and ideological limits already set by the target language, i.e. English. For his narration to be intelligible, Harold needs to deploy linguistic signifiers that he shares with his audience. But conjunctions such as "however" and "yet not" appear as attempts to deflect meaning and evade stereotypes of otherness and Eurocentric prejudice, as they acknowledge difference and resist appropriation. I agree with Kuzmic that the section on the Balkan countries "disrupts the classic Self/Other distinction, yet precisely because of that it allows for a closer examination of the so-called in-between places that equate with neither and yet are both."[21] In these in-between spaces I see the act of cultural translation. Something between "however"-and-"yet not" stance applies to Byron's description of the warriors dress, the so-called "fustanella": while Hobhouse would rather see this particular dress as a marker of civilization, when distinguishing between people who are dressed in small-clothes, "the coat and hat of civilized Europe" and those in the white dress, Byron compares the "fustanella" with the Scottish kilt.[22] Where Hobhouse saw a rift, Byron establishes a translation, as in bringing across: he uses the signifiers of his language and, however resisting appropriation.

Another sign of resistance to appropriation is the opening of the song: "Tamburgi," a word that the narrator takes from the Albanian. "Tambur" stands for the drum that was played before the battle and "tamburxhi" for the drummer. This word transcends linguistic systems: In Albanian ears it has an authentic, national ring: whether in English "Tamburgi! Tamburgi! Thy 'larum afar" or in other languages, say Italian, "Tamburgi !Tamburgi ! è il grido di Guerra" or in German "Tamburgi! Tamburgi! dein Kriegsruf tönt weit" or in Albanian "Tamburxhi! Tamburxhi! Thirrja jote ushton." It stands as a recognizable marker of national identity that leads to the content that follows. The value does not lie in the incontestable authenticity of the song: as Byron frankly admits, it is a work a medley of different texts. Its value lies in its "untranslatebility" and could stand for what Gayatri Spivak calls an act of "withholding."[23] The refusal to translate and to preserve its alienness without giving in to the demands for transparent meaning of the target language, i.e. the

[21] Kuzmic 63.
[22] Hobhouse 1: 19.
[23] Gayatri Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," *The Translation Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000) 410.

British reader, is an attempt to reconstruct nothing less than the history of another imperial conquest and like the slave narratives it effectively raises public consciousness. If nothing else, it promotes inquiry and achieves what Mary Wollstonecraft, herself an ardent traveler, considered the goal of the traveling author. In *Letters on Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, when contemplating on the different climate, customs and lifestyle she met with in Norway and Sweden she writes: "Travelers who require that every nation should resemble their native country, had better stay at home... The most essential service, I presume, that authors could render to society, would be to promote inquiry and discussion, instead of making those dogmatic assertions which only appear circulated to gird the human mind round with imaginary circles, like the paper globe which represents the one he inhabits."[24] So the very undecidebility, opacity of meaning are parts of the service travelers offer to the world. Of course, the song must have shocked English sensibilities with its violent outcry for freedom, just like slave-narratives related by slaves did.

From an aesthetic point of view, Ali Pasha's warrior-dancers prefigure Byron's profile. These are warriors, brave men that upon casting their sabers metamorphose into dancers, singers and poets. "Each palikar his saber from his cast/ And bounding hand in hand, man linked to man" (*CHP* 2.637-8). Hobhouse's observations deliver one plausible reason for Byron's fascination with the warrior-dancers and their attire: they carry a pen in their girdle next to the saber and knife, and although they never use it, they are as proud of it as of their arms.[25] Does not Lord Byron's life weave into his life-narrative the portrait of the poet with that of the warrior, when he committed himself to the freedom of the Greek people?

[24] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters on Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (Kessinger Publishing, 2004) 31.
[25] Hobhouse 1: 123.